

Nativity of the Holy theotokos
Russian Orthodox Church
Afognak
Afognak Island
Alaska

HABS No. AK-55

HABS
AK,
12-AFOG,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDITION
FOLLOWS

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NATIVITY OF THE HOLY THEOTOKOS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

HABS No. AK-55

Location: Afognak, Afognak Island, near Kodiak Island, Alaska.

Present Owner: Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant/
Use: Vacant.

Significance: A number of historic Russian Orthodox churches survive in Alaska, built by Native congregations in traditional forms. Erected at the turn of the century, the Nativity of the Holy Theotokos Russian Orthodox Church was constructed of large hewn logs, dovetailed at the corners. The gable-roofed structure had a sanctuary, nave, belltower, and vestibule, all clearly expressed on the exterior.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1901-05.
2. Original plans and construction: This log church was composed of a sanctuary, nave, belltower, and vestibule. The gable-roofed nave had an octagonal cupola which lit the interior; it supported a small onion dome. The sanctuary also had a gable roof, with the same pitch as the nave, 1' to 2' lower. The belfry of the three-story belltower had round-arched openings and a pyramidal roof. The one-story gable-roofed vestibule had paired windows on the south side. (See Early Views, Part III, below.)

The villagers undertook construction themselves, with a contribution of \$600 from the Alaskan Ecclesiastical Consistory. The village was large, reflected in the size of its church; the population in 1916 was 740.¹

3. Alterations and additions: During the 1964 tidal wave, the village of Afognak was badly damaged, although the church was not harmed. The villagers were relocated at Port Lions, and took icons and the royal doors from the iconostas to the church that was built there. The Afognak church, now without a congregation, sits on shore near the high-tide mark, and is slowly being undermined.

Sometime after 1975, the sanctuary was dismantled, and its pieces stored inside the nave. The east wall was filled in, and there are signs of new pilings. On the west

¹ Documents Relative to the History of Alaska, 2:1.

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end, the belfry had disappeared by 1975, and the vestibule after 1975. Today the church consists of the nave and two stories of the belltower.

B. Previous Churches on the Site:

Afognak was founded in the first half of the nineteenth century as a retirement community for Russian pensioners who wished to remain in Alaska when their tour of duty with the Russian-American Company was over. In the early 1880s, the population of Afognak was 195 creoles and 144 Eskimos.² An 1895 church account noted that the church had been built by the villagers in 1869. "It is quite spacious and includes an iconostas and porch."³

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The hewn log structure, now visible in places due to the removal of the sanctuary, lent a solidity to this classic Alaskan Russian Orthodox church.
2. Condition of fabric: Since removal of the belfry, vestibule, and sanctuary, the structure has been stabilized, but continued movement of the shoreline will have a detrimental effect.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building as it stands today measures 28'-0" x 49'-11", although with vestibule and sanctuary it would have been close to 70' in length.
2. Foundations: Post foundations.
3. Walls: The walls are covered with novelty siding, beveled on both edges, painted white. There is no siding on the east end, where the opening into the sanctuary has been filled in with boards. On part of the north side, the siding has been removed, exposing the logs underneath.
4. Structural system, framing: The walls are constructed of hewn logs, laid horizontally, and dovetailed at the corners. The logs measure 9" to 16" in height

² Ivan Petroff, Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1884), 28.

³ "Concerning the Orthodox Mission in America," October 14, 1895, translated by Sister Victoria, Orthodox Alaska 6 (January 1977): 40.

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and 12" in width, and were chinked with moss. The roof system is a modified king post truss, constructed of sawn lumber; only the horizontal elements in the roof are log.

The belltower has a wood frame, covered with diagonal boards onto which the novelty siding was nailed.

5. Chimneys: There is one stovepipe on the south slope of the roof.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The doorway to the narthex has double doors with five rectangular panels, set in plain frames.
 - b. Windows: The windows had six-over-six-light double-hung sash; most have been removed and boarded up. There was a similar window on the south side of the belltower, first floor; at the second level of the belltower there are smaller openings on three sides.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: There is a gable roof, covered with wood shingles.
 - b. Cupola: There is an octagonal cupola rising from the roof of the nave. Its walls are covered with wood shingles painted white, and its polygonal roof is also covered with wood shingles. There are two six-over-six-light double-hung sash windows.
 - c. Belltower: There is a two-story belltower on the west end of the building. Square in plan, it is topped by a pyramidal roof, flattened in the center to hold a belfry.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The nave is one open room. The amvon is raised two steps. The narthex has an enclosed stairway on the north side.
2. Stairways: The stairway to the belltower is very steep, almost a ladder.
3. Flooring: The flooring is of wide boards, covered with linoleum in an oriental pattern.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The narthex is finished in horizontal tongue-and-groove boards, wider on the walls than on the ceiling. The walls of the nave are covered with generations of wallpaper and oilcloth. One layer appears to have been a

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green and gold wallpaper with a contrasting frieze. The wainscot is oilcloth, painted brown. The ceiling is tongue-and-groove boards.

5. Doorways and doors: The double doors between the narthex and nave have twelve lights in the upper halves, wood panels below.
6. Decorative features: Only a fragment of the iconostas remains; it appears to have been paneled wood. There is a dramatic octagonal dome, which rises through the roof where it is lit by the cupola. The lower 4' to 5' of the dome is curved, then straight-sided above, with a flat ceiling. It is finished in tongue-and-groove boards, painted white; ghosts of icons are visible. The exterior of the dome, visible in the attic, has ribs which were apparently hand-carved; the rest of the woodwork is machine-sawn.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces west; its sanctuary would have been on the east end. The church is at the very edge of the beach.
2. Historic landscape design: Historic photographs show a fenced churchyard and a picket gate; the beach was apparently farther away.
3. Outbuildings: About 25 yards northwest of the church is a one-and-a-half-story gable-roofed house, covered with novelty siding on the south side, and wood shingles on the north. About 30 yards southwest of the church is a one-story house, constructed of large-diameter hewn logs, dovetailed at the corners, with wood-framed additions. Both of these houses are vacant, in overgrown settings.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

The Baranof Museum in Kodiak has two photographs of this church, both showing it with belfry, vestibule, and sanctuary intact. One photograph is in the Chaffin Collection; the other has the accession number P-365-2.

B. Bibliography:

"Concerning the Orthodox Mission in America," October 14, 1895, translated by Sister Victoria, Orthodox Alaska 6 (January 1977): 36-46.

Davis, Nancy Yaw. "The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Five Pacific Eskimo Villages as Revealed by the Earthquake." The Great Alaska Earthquake of 1964: Human Ecology. Washington: National Academy of Sciences, 1970. 125-146.

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Documents Relative to the History of Alaska. Microfilm of typescript translation of Russian-language and other documents, including excerpts from the Alaska Church Collection in volumes 1 and 2.

Petroff, Ivan. Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1884.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of the Nativity of the Holy Theotokos Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during summer 1989 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Jean Swearingen, curator; John Lowe III, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

ADDENDUM TO
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